

Chapter 4: Social Structure and Social Interaction

Chapter Summary

People are influenced by the norms and beliefs of their cultures and society. This influence can take a more personal and intimate level or a more general and widespread level that affects large numbers of people. Sociologists who study the affect of social life on society use two approaches, macrosociology (focusing on broad features of social structure) and microsociology (concentrating on small-scale, face-to-face social interactions). Functionalists and conflict theorists tend to use the macrosociological approach, while symbolic interactionists are more likely to use the microsociological approach. Although most sociologists specialize in one approach or the other, both approaches are necessary for a complete understanding of social life.

Using the macrosociological approach, functionalists and conflict theorists examine the more expansive aspects of social structure. It refers to a society's framework, consisting of the various relationships between people and groups that direct and set limits on human behavior.

The major components of social structure include culture, social class, social status, roles, groups, and social institutions. Social structure guides people's behaviors. A person's location in the social structure (his or her social class, social status, the roles he or she plays, and the culture, groups, and social institutions to which he or she belongs) underlies his or her perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. People develop these perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors from their place in the social structure, and they act accordingly. All of the components of social structure work together to maintain social order by limiting, guiding, and organizing human behavior.

Social institutions are the organized, usual, or standard ways by which society meets its basic needs. In industrial and postindustrial societies, social institutions include the family, religion, law, politics, economics, education, science, medicine, the military, and the mass media. Functionalists and conflict theorists disagree over the purposes and effects of social institutions. According to functionalists, social institutions exist because they meet universal group needs. Conflict theorists view social institutions as the primary means by which the elite maintains its privileged position. Social structure is not static. It responds to changes in culture, technology, economic conditions, group relationships, and societal needs and priorities.

Structural changes can, sometimes, fundamentally and permanently alter the way a society organizes itself. Emile Durkheim demonstrated this with the concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity; Ferdinand Tönnies used the constructs of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

While functionalist and conflict theorists tend to explore broad features of social structure from a macrosociological perspective, symbolic interactionists are more inclined to examine small-scale, face-to-face social interactions from a microsociological perspective. Symbolic interactionists are especially interested in the symbols that people use to define their worlds and how these definitions, in turn, influence human behavior. For symbolic interactionists, this may include studying stereotyping, personal space, and touching.

Stereotypes are assumptions that people make about other people based on previous associations with them or people with similar visible characteristics. Stereotypes may also be based on what they have been “told” about “such people.” These assumptions may be accurate, semi-accurate, or completely inaccurate. Stereotypes affect how people define and treat other people. They influence how these “other people” define themselves and adjust their behaviors accordingly. Stereotypes based on gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and intelligence are particularly widespread and profoundly consequential in today’s society.

According to symbolic interactionists, people surround themselves with a “personal bubble” that they carefully protect by controlling space, touching, and eye contact. Anthropologist Edward Hall studied how human groups have different perceptions of personal space and how much physical distance they use to keep physically apart from people in specific situations. Frequency of touching also differs across cultures. Furthermore, the meaning of touching differs not only across cultures, but also within cultures. People also protect their “personal bubble” by controlling eye contact. This includes the length of contact and whether it is direct or indirect.

Erving Goffman developed dramaturgy, an analytical approach that analyzes social life in terms of the stage. According to Goffman, everyday life consists of social actors playing assigned roles. At the core of Goffman’s approach is impression management, or how people try to control other people’s impressions of them through sign-vehicles (social setting, appearance, and manner), teamwork, and face-saving behavior.

Symbolic interactionists contend that reality is subjectively created by people’s perceptions of “what is real.” People define their own realities and then live within those definitions. The social construction of reality refers to how people construct their views of the world. Ethnomethodology is the study of how people use background assumptions (deeply embedded common understandings concerning people’s views of the world and how they ought to act) to make sense out of life.

Because social structure and social interaction influence human behavior, macrosociology and microsociology are essential to understanding social life.

Chapter Outline

I. Levels of Sociological Analysis

- A. Macrosociology places the focus on large-scale features of social structure. It investigates large-scale social forces and the effects they have on entire societies and the groups within them. It is utilized by functionalist and conflict theorists.
- B. Microsociology places the emphasis on social interaction, or what people do when they come together. Symbolic interactionism uses this level of analysis.
- C. Each yields distinctive perspectives, and both are needed to gain a more complete understanding of social life.

II. The Macrosociological Perspective: Social Structure

- A. Social structure is defined as the patterned relationships between people that persist over time. Behaviors and attitudes are determined by our location in the social structure. Components of social structure are culture, social class, social status, roles, groups, and institutions.
- B. Culture refers to a group's language, beliefs, values, behaviors, and gestures. It includes the material objects used by a group. It determines what kind of people we will become.
- C. Social class is based on income, education, and occupational prestige. Large numbers of people who have similar amounts of income and education and who work at jobs that are roughly comparable in prestige make up a social class.
- D. Social status refers to the positions that an individual occupies. A status may carry a great deal of prestige (judge or astronaut), or very little (gas station attendant or cook in a fast-food restaurant).
 - 1. Status set refers to all the statuses or positions that an individual occupies.
 - 2. Ascribed statuses are positions an individual either inherits at birth or receives involuntarily later in life. Examples include race, sex, and social class of parents.
 - 3. Achieved statuses are positions that are earned, accomplished, or involve at least some effort or activity on the individual's part. Examples include becoming a college president or a bank robber.
 - 4. Each status provides guidelines for how we are to act and feel.
 - 5. Status symbols are signs that people use who want others to recognize that they occupy a certain status. For example, wedding rings that are worn, fancy cars, living in expensive homes, etc.
 - 6. A master status—such as being male or female—cuts across the other statuses that an individual occupies. Status inconsistency is a contradiction or mismatch between statuses. A disability can become a master status for some. This condition can override other statuses and determines others' perception of this person.
- E. Roles are the behaviors, obligations, and privileges attached to a status. The individual occupies a status, but plays a role. Roles are an essential component of culture because they lay out what is expected of people, and as individuals perform their roles, those roles mesh together to form the society.

- F. A group consists of people who regularly and consciously interact with one another and typically share similar values, norms, and expectations. When we belong to a group we give up to others at least some control over our lives.
 - 1. The control depends on the relationship and amount of interaction that we have with that group.

III. Social Institutions

- A. Social institutions are society's standard ways of meeting its basic needs.
 - 1. The family, religion, law, politics, economics, education, science, medicine, and the military all are social institutions.
 - 2. In industrialized societies, social institutions tend to be more formal and in nonliterate societies, more informal.
 - 3. Each institution has its own groups, status, values, and norms.
- B. Social institutions are sociologically significant because they set limits and provide guidelines for our behavior.
- C. The mass media is an emerging social institution; it influences our attitudes toward social issues, other people, and even our self-concept. Of interest is who controls the mass media. Functionalists would say that the mass media represent the varied interests of the many groups that make up the nation, while conflict theorists would see that the interests of the political elite are represented.
- D. The functionalists and conflict theorists differ in how they see social institutions.
 - 1. Functionalists view social institutions as established ways of meeting group needs (or functional requisites), such as replacing members; socializing new members; producing and distributing goods and services; preserving order; and providing a sense of purpose.
 - 2. Conflict theorists look at social institutions as the primary means by which the elite maintains its privileged position.
- E. Changes in social structure occur as culture changes because of evolving values, new technologies, innovative ideas, and globalization.
- F. Many sociologists have tried to find an answer to the question of what holds society together.
 - 1. Emile Durkheim found the key to social cohesion, the degree to which members of a society feel united by shared values and other social bonds, in the concepts of mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is a collective consciousness that people experience as a result of performing the same or similar tasks, while organic solidarity is a collective consciousness based on the interdependence brought about by an increasingly specialized division of labor—that is, how people divide up tasks.
 - 2. Ferdinand Tönnies analyzed how intimate community (*Gemeinschaft*) was being replaced by impersonal associations (*Gesellschaft*). *Gemeinschaft* is a society in which life is intimate; a community in which everyone knows everyone else and people share a sense of togetherness and *Gesellschaft* is a society dominated by impersonal relationships, individual accomplishments, and self-interest.
 - 3. These concepts are still relevant today, helping us understand contemporary events such as the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

IV. The Microsociological Perspective: Social Interaction in Everyday Life

- A. The microsociological approach places emphasis on face-to-face social interaction, or what people do when they are in the presence of one another.
- B. Symbolic interactionists are interested in the symbols that people use to define their worlds, how people look at things, and how that affects their behavior. Included within this perspective are studies of stereotypes, personal space, and touching.
 - 1. Stereotypes are used in everyday life. First impressions are shaped by the assumptions one person makes about another person's sex, race, age, and physical appearance. Such assumptions affect one's ideas about the person and how one acts toward that person. Stereotypes tend to be self-fulfilling—that is, they bring out the very kinds of behavior that fit the stereotype. They even have an impact on what we accomplish. People can also resist stereotypes and change outcomes.
 - 2. Personal space refers to the physical space that surrounds us and that we claim as our own. The amount of personal space varies from one culture to another. Anthropologist Edward Hall found that Americans use four different distance zones: (1) Intimate distance (about 18 inches from the body) for lovemaking, wrestling, comforting, and protecting; (2) Personal distance (from 18 inches to 4 feet) for friends, acquaintances, and ordinary conversations; (3) Social distance (from 4 feet to 12 feet) for impersonal or formal relationships such as job interviews; and (4) Public distance (beyond 12 feet) for even more formal relationships such as separating dignitaries and public speakers from the general public.
 - 3. From our culture, we learn rules about touching. Both the frequency and the meaning of touching vary from one culture to the next. Men and women react differently to being touched.
 - 4. We protect our personal space by controlling eye contact.
- C. Dramaturgy is an analysis of how we present ourselves in everyday life.
 - 1. Dramaturgy is the name given to an approach pioneered by Erving Goffman. Social life is analyzed in terms of drama or the stage.
 - 2. According to Goffman, socialization prepares people for learning to perform on the stage of everyday life. *Front stage* is where performances are given (wherever lines are delivered). *Back stage* is where people rest from their performances, discuss their presentations, and plan future performances.
 - 3. *Role performance* is the particular emphasis or interpretation that an individual gives a role, the person's "style." *Role conflict* occurs when the expectations attached to one role are incompatible with the expectations of another role—in other words, conflict between roles. *Role strain* refers to conflicts that someone feels within a role.
 - 4. *Impression management* is the person's efforts to manage the impressions that others receive of her or him.
 - 5. We tend to become the roles we play. Some roles become part of our self-concept. For some, when leaving a role such as a marriage, police work, the military, the role can become so intertwined that leaving it can threaten a person's identity.

6. Three types of *sign-vehicles* are used to communicate information about the self: (1) social setting—where the action unfolds, which includes scenery (furnishings used to communicate messages); (2) appearance—how a person looks when he or she plays his or her role, and this includes props which decorate the person; and (3) manner—the attitudes demonstrated as an individual plays her or his roles.
 7. Teamwork, which is when two or more players work together to make sure a performance goes off as planned, shows that we are adept players.
 8. When a performance doesn't come off, we engage in face-saving behavior, or ignoring flaws in someone's performance, which Goffman defines as tact.
 9. A face-saving technique that might be used is *studied nonobservance* in which a behavior might be completely ignored in order that neither person will face embarrassment.
 10. Impression management also occurs with families, businesses, colleges and even the government.
- D. Ethnomethodology involves the discovery of rules concerning our views of the world and how people ought to act.
1. Ethnomethodologists try to uncover people's background assumptions, which form the basic core of one's reality, and provide basic rules concerning our view of the world and of how people ought to act.
 2. Harold Garfinkel founded the ethnomethodological approach. He conducted experiments asking subjects to pretend that they did not understand the basic rules of social life in order to uncover others' reactions and break background assumptions.
- E. The social construction of reality refers to what people define as real because of their background assumptions and life experiences.
1. Symbolic interactionists believe that people define their own reality and then live within those definitions.
 2. The Thomas theorem (by sociologist W. I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas) states, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."
 3. Therefore, our behavior does not depend on the objective existence of something, but on our subjective interpretation or our definition of reality.
 4. James Henslin and Mae Biggs conducted research to show that when physicians are performing gynecological exams they will socially construct reality so that the vaginal exams become nonsexual.

V. The Need for Both Macrosociology and Microsociology

- A. To understand human behavior, it is necessary to grasp both social structure (macrosociology) and social interaction (microsociology).
- B. Both are necessary to understand social life fully because each adds to our knowledge of human experience.

KEY TERMS

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

achieved status: a position that is earned, accomplished, or involves at least some effort or activity on the individual's part (99)

ascribed status: a position an individual either inherits at birth or receives involuntarily later in life (99)

back stage: places where people rest from their performances, discuss their presentations, and plan future performances (112)

background assumption: a deeply embedded common understanding, of how the world operates and of how people ought to act (116)

body language: the ways in which people use their bodies, to give messages to others (111)

division of labor: the splitting of a group's or society's tasks into specialties (105)

dramaturgy: an approach, pioneered by Erving Goffman, in which social life is analyzed in terms of drama or the stage; also called *dramaturgical analysis* (112)

ethnomethodology: the study of how people use background assumptions to make sense out of life (116)

face-saving behavior: techniques used to salvage a performance (interaction) that is going sour (114)

front stage: places where we give performances (112)

Gemeinschaft: a type of society in which life is intimate; a community in which everyone knows everyone else and people share a sense of togetherness (106)

Gesellschaft: a type of society dominated by impersonal relationships, individual accomplishments, and self-interest (106)

group: people who have something in common and who believe that what they have in common is significant; also called a *social group* (101)

impression management: people's efforts to control the impressions that others receive of them (112)

macrosociology: analysis of social life that focuses on broad features of society, such as social class and the relationships of groups to one another; usually used by functionalist and conflict theorists (96)

master status: a status that cuts across the other statuses that an individual occupies (100)

mechanical solidarity: Durkheim's term for the unity (a shared consciousness) that people feel as a result of performing the same or similar tasks (105)

microsociology: analysis of social life focusing on social interaction; typically used by symbolic interactionists (96)

organic solidarity: Durkheim's term for the interdependence that results from the division of labor; people depending on others to fulfill their jobs (105)

role: the behaviors, obligations, and privileges attached to a status (101)

role conflict: conflict that someone feels *between* roles because the expectations attached to one role are incompatible with the expectations of another role (113)

role performance: the ways in which someone performs a role within the limits that the role provides; showing a particular "style" or "personality" (112)

role strain: conflicts that someone feels *within* a role (113)

sign-vehicle: a term used by Goffman to refer to how people use social setting, appearance, and manner to communicate information about the self (113)

social class: according to Weber, a large group of people who rank close to one another in property power and prestige; according to Marx, one of two groups: capitalists who own the means of production or workers who sell their labor (98)

social construction of reality: the use of background assumptions and life experiences to define what is real (118)

social institution: the organized, usual, or standard ways by which society meets its basic needs (102)

social integration: the degree to which members of a group or a society feel united by shared values and other social bonds; also known as social cohesion (105)

social interaction: what people do when they are in one another's presence (96)

socialization: the process by which people learn the characteristics of their group — the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, norms, and actions thought appropriate for them. (101)

social structure: the framework (or typical patterns) that surrounds us, consisting of the relationships of people and groups to one another; which give direction to and set limits on behavior (97)

status: the position that someone occupies in a social group (98)

status inconsistency: ranking high on some dimensions of social class and low on others also called *status discrepancy* (101)

status set: all the statuses or positions that an individual occupies (98)

status symbols: items used to identify a status (100)

stereotype: assumptions of what people are like, whether true or false (111)

teamwork: the collaboration of two or more people to manage impressions jointly (114)

Thomas theorem: William I. and Dorothy S. Thomas' classic formulation of the definition of the situation: "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (117)

KEY PEOPLE

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Elijah Anderson: In a series of books, Anderson has studied the lives of inner city residents (*Streetwise* and *Code of the Streets*) and suggests that their world is organized around the same norms and beliefs that characterize our wider society. (96)

William Chambliss: Chambliss used macro and microsociology to study high school gangs and found that social structure and interaction explained the patterns of behavior in these groups. (119)

Emile Durkheim: Durkheim identified mechanical and organic solidarity as the keys to social cohesion. As societies get larger, they divide up work and this division of labor makes people depend on one another. (105-106)

Helen Ebaugh: Ebaugh interviewed people who were no longer performing a role that had once been central in their lives—people whose marriages had ended, people who had left jobs and careers as police officers, military personnel, or religious orders. Since these roles were so critical, she found that many of them struggled to define their very identity as a result of the loss of these roles. (114)

Harold Garfinkel: Garfinkel is the founder of ethnomethodology; he conducted experiments in order to uncover people's background assumptions. (116-117)

Erving Goffman: Goffman developed dramaturgy, the perspective within symbolic interactionism that views social life as a drama on the stage. (112-114)

Edward Hall: This anthropologist found that personal space varied from one culture to another and that North Americans use four different “distance zones.” (108-110)

James Henslin and Mae Biggs: The author of your text, along with gynecological nurse Biggs, researched how doctors and patients constructed the social reality of vaginal examinations in order to define these exams as nonsexual. (118-119)

Elliot Liebow: This sociologist studied streetcorner men and found that their lives are not disorganized, but influenced by the same norms and beliefs of the larger society. (96)

Mark Snyder: Snyder carried out research in order to test whether stereotypes are self-fulfilling; he found that subjects were influenced to behave in a particular way based on their stereotypes. (110)

W. I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas: These sociologists said that “If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” (117)

Ferdinand Tönnies: Tönnies analyzed different types of societies that existed before and after industrialization. He used the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to describe the two types of societies. (106)